SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Flonzie Brown Wright

Moderated by Amanda Lyons

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William Winter Archives and History Building

Jackson, Mississippi

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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit *"Freedom Rides: Journey for Change"* conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

LYONS: This is Speak Now recording number 26. This is Amanda Lyons with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is December 20, 2011. And I have with me Mrs. Flonzie Brown Wright here to share her memories of the Civil Rights Era. Thank you so much for coming.

WRIGHT: Thank you, Amanda. Thank you. Certainly let me begin by saying to you, Amanda, I certainly appreciate the opportunity to share this—share in this documentary or to share in the information that is going to be used as a teaching tool to the masses. And not only that, I really express my appreciation and high admiration for Governor Winter. And to be sitting in a building which honors him and his accomplishments is nothing short of a miracle because I am from the old school, and I remember the days when he was certainly instrumental in trying to bring people of all races, ethnicities, religious persuasions to see what can we do to better Mississippi to make Mississippi a better place. So certainly I admire and respect him for the stands that he has taken on many issues.

Since returning to Mississippi last November, we had met on maybe two or three occasions in his office to just dialog. I gave him a copy of my publication about my life in Mississippi during the days of the Movement. And so I bring a perspective that I'm sure a lot of others bring as well.

I was born in a small farming community just outside of Canton called Farmhaven. And I began school at age four and moved to Canton by the time that I was in the sixth—the second grade at six years old. And I was born to poor but very, very proud parents; parents who brought to our home various cultures.

On my dad's side, my dad's people—my dad's dad and grandfather, my grand dad's grandfather—was in fact a slave. His son was the descendant of a slave, and of course, so was my dad. As you know from history that back in the day, slaves or descendants of slaves could have no education. So as a consequence of that my grandfather could not read, could not write, and could not hear. So he was the father of 13 children, and was determined that none of his kids would be sharecroppers as he had been.

On my mom's side my mom brings a very diverse culture—Caucasian, Indian, Creole—the whole gamut, and of course merging the slave history with the way things were done when you were from a mixed family, I learned a lot about just life and how to deal with people and how to deal with situations.

And so coming up in Canton and growing up in Canton, I knew nothing about a Civil Rights Movement; had never heard the term. I grew up as a teenager and attended the Canton High—the segregated Canton High School—then spent five or six years at Holy Child Jesus School. So

interacting with other cultures was nothing new to me because not only from my family background but from my school background, it was just no—it was just not an issue. But I learned so many valuable lessons from those experiences.

I moved to California in the late fifties, returned in the early sixties; and while I was there for that four year period, I saw on TV the marches, the demonstrations, and people going to jail, and the beatings, the lynchings, and all that stuff, and so I called my mother from California, because I'm in sunny Cal and everything's free and you can go eat together and all of that. And so I called Mom and I said, "Mom, what in the world is going on in my home state? Why are people going to jail?" And I said, "People being beaten. What's this Civil Rights thing?" And of course Mother and Dad did a real good job of shielding and protecting us three children from the ugliness of racism. And, of course, she was I guess required at that point to tell me a little bit more about how things were back in the day.

What I remember as a child was that we lived on one side of the tracks and Whites lived on the other side of the tracks. I also remember walking to school and the buses—the big, nice, yellow buses—would pass with the white kids going to school on the buses, and I would have to walk farther than they would. But I never equated that with a systemic system of racism. I never equated that with a…a…a…a system that said to Blacks one thing and said to Whites something else. And so I began to really have a thirst for "what is this Movement thing?"

And I returned to Mississippi in 1962, and Canton was just a hot spot. Canton, as you probably know, is 75 percent African American but yet there were no people of color in elected positions—or even appointed positions—at that point, and so I didn't think a whole lot about it at that time. But then I went to Biloxi to care for cousin who was ill, and this was at the time when they were integrating the beaches. And I had an opportunity to meet attorneys R. Jess Brown, Jack Young, and Carsie Hall. I worked in a little restaurant in Biloxi. They would come in every day, and I would serve them. And they would talk about who went to jail, and who got beat, and they had to get with the NAACP to get some money to get these folk out of jail, and we were gonna go back to the beaches the next day and try to integrate the beaches again. That was so foreign to me. I had absolutely no clue as to why folk going to the beaches were going to jail. But then again as I began to really, really thirst for the underlying currents of why these things were taking place, it ignited a fire within my very soul; and I wanted to learn more about what was actually going on in Mississippi.

And I was in Biloxi when Medgar Evers was assassinated. So those two things: the beach rides and the integrations of the beaches and Medgar's assassination. I did not know Medgar, but what came to me as a young

woman of 22 years old—21 at that point—that if a man could just be gunned down in his home, in the doorstep of his home, while his wife and children looked on, I said there is something wrong with this picture. How could a man that attending a meeting of any kind—NAACP or whatever—come home and someone lie in wait for him in the bushes and blow his heart out in the presence of Myrlie and those three children?

And so again that began to just ignite more of a passion in me to learn what was actually happening and what could I do. Now I never saw myself as an activist or a leader. My best times—and I tell folk this and sometimes they say, "Girl, you know you know better"—but my best times, Amanda, are kind of in the background, planning things and then giving the task to someone else to do and letting them get the recognition. I never sought recognition. I never sought the spotlight. But people saw in me qualities that they thought they could trust.

And so Medgar Evers' assassination for me was a defining moment. I knew about Emmett Till because I was a girl when that happened, and I had two cousins who were killed in a very similar fashion. So I knew those stories but then never knew that these things were again associated with just hatred and racism. And so—but when Medgar was assassinated, I began to get involved in the beaches and the mass meetings; and I began to sing and learn the freedom songs in Biloxi and was going to the meetings just in the background. And I spoke out one night about something and someone, whatever I said, someone thought that was such a great statement, they wanted me to become involved. But I was on my way back to Canton to see about my mom.

I came on back to Canton. Of course Canton was just as hot if not hotter than Biloxi, and I just kinda laid low for a little while. And then people knew that I was home and had always been, I guess, a person who believed in trying to do the right thing. And my community began to tap me to get involved in the Canton/Madison County Movement. And then this is where my roots lie. I began to work door to door doing voter registration. And I knew a lot of folk had tried to register, and they had been thrown out of the courthouse, cussed out. And when people went to register, their names were put in the paper so that if they worked for white folk uptown, when they came back that next day they lost their jobs because they were characterized as trouble makers or agitators. And during that same time frame there were a lot of white students who had come to Mississippi and in Canton and so those persons who were trying to register were associated with the white troublemakers from the North that they need to go back, we can solve our own problems, and that kind of thing. So I began to get involved in the mass meetings and I'd sing a little bit. And I, little by little, began to understand what this Civil Rights Movement was really all about.

And so I went to the…the impetus was let's try and register. And so when I went to the courthouse as many others had done, you were given a 21 item questionnaire and when you got to item number 17 you went to the registrar's desk, reached in a cigar box, and pulled out a section of the Mississippi constitution that he had typed on small pieces of paper and folded. So you pulled out a section, and then you had to interpret that section to his satisfaction. Now, if it wasn't to his satisfaction, whether he knew or not, you didn't pass. And of course that was my—my experience as well. I went to attempt to register; same thing happened—21 item questionnaire, the cigar box. I pulled out the section on habeas corpus. Had no idea what it meant; but I wrote something hoping he was having a good day, and he would let me sign my name. Well, that was not the case. And I finished my questionnaire, gave it to him, and I stood and waited for him to give me a response. And I asked him, "Well, how did I do? Did I pass?" And he said, "Well, no you didn't." I said "Well, sir, what was my mistake?" Well, he called me a bunch of ugly names and told me to get out of his office but not quite that kind.

And when I left the courthouse that day—and as a matter of fact this is the same courthouse where "A Time to Kill" was filmed, ironically—and when I left the courthouse that day I was determined that I was going to run for office and get his job. And the community had already been saying to me, "You've got to run for office. You've got to run for office. We trust you. We know you can do the job." I knew nothing about politics; had no desire to be in a political office. And so—but with that Mrs. Annie Devine had already talked with me about it, and I decided that day that when he was so mean to me and I knew of so many other stories from other folk about how mean he had been, I decided that I would run for office. And when election time came, I didn't run for his office; but I ran for the office which supervised his office, and I won it. And, consequently, I became the first African American female to be elected to a public office in Mississippi since Reconstruction. And that was in 1968 with the position of Election Commissioner, because that's where the power lies, because if you couldn't register and vote, you couldn't change anything. And no matter how many times our people tried to register and vote, if they could not break through those racist and racial barriers then they would never be allowed to vote. And, of course, there had been so many things that had happened with the registrar. You would go to vote, and he might write over your name "deceased", "moved out of town", "moved to China", anything and as a result you would have to vote a challenge ballot. Your vote may have gotten counted; in all probability it did not. It got tossed in the trash can. So there were so, so, so many challenges, but in my administration I tried to change a lot of things and to make things better for my—the citizens in Canton. And some of the changes that I put into effect back in the late sixties are still in effect in Canton now. As an example, I created a system to select jurors. Instead of the registrar being able to arbitrarily select jurors, we

implemented the system, through the courts, that every tenth registered voter could be a juror as opposed to him arbitrarily selecting people. I also—when I got in, I understood why blacks could not even get their petitions certified because if you present a petition of 500 signatures and you only need 300, he could cross them all out and say you were not registered in another precinct—anything to keep blacks from being able to run for office. And so I was able to change some of those things. I trained poll workers. I trained people how to run elections. And, so from that I had an opportunity to work and meet with Dr. King during the 1966 march and a lot of other people who have done in a similar way to what I have tried to do and that is to make a difference. That's what it's really all about. It's not about I have more than 400 awards and plaques and citations, I've been honored at the Kennedy Center, I'm a best selling author, and all that stuff. But that's not at the end of the day, that's not it. What is it, is what have you done with your life to make something better for somebody else. You know we are servants. Leaders are servants. People have asked me many times "How did you get to be this great leader?" Well, I'm not a great leader. I don't think that I'm a great leader. I say to them, "You've gotta be a servant. You gotta serve." And if you serve, folk will know you can lead. But if you serve and give them an opportunity to share their gifts and skills, then leadership is an automatic thing. There is no leadership course, course on leadership—well, there are some—but it's something that you're born with. You have to learn how to develop that; not only for yourself but for other people to make things better. So, that's what Flonzie Brown Goodman Wright is all about.

LYONS: Well, I have—I had one question. As you were talking about when you were elected as the Election Commissioner, I'm just curious. I don't know a lot about it, how you were elected if at that point in time, I assume that the African American people still could not vote or was that the case?

WRIGHT: No, no we gained...

LYONS: Ok, I wasn't…I was just wanting to clarify...

WRIGHT: No, we gained the right to vote, pitiful but, we really gained the right to vote under the 1963-64 Civil Rights Act.

LYONS: Oh. Right, right.

WRIGHT: Even though it had been on the books for years and years, we still did not really have that right freely without intimidation and all of that. And so Madison County—Canton Madison County—is 70 percent African American. And so once the Voting Rights Act was passed, we put on I mean a massive campaign to get people registered going door to door. I went to Washington as the guest of Congressman Charles Diggs to testify

before the Congress to send in federal examiners because we had such a hard time getting registered. So as a result of that some, Mississippi counties were chosen to send in the examiners and Madison County was one of them. So by the time '68 came, we were well in full swing of voter registration

LYONS: Ok. I gotcha. I gotcha. I had forgotten about that. Well, did you have any closing thoughts or looking back on your activities in the Movement…?

WRIGHT: Well, well, I just wanted to encourage people to certainly view your materials and to if you're not involved get involved. If you've been involved and you're not involved now get *back* involved, because as we can see even though we have certainly come a long way, we have still a very, very, very long way to go in many areas. Let's educate our children. Let's restore our families. Let's keep these boys off the street with all this dope and crack and stuff and educate those young minds. In Ohio three or four years ago the legislature passed, passed monies to build 16 new prisons and two new colleges—16 prisons and two colleges. And the way they were able to determine that, they start tracking your third grade scores in most schools. And so they can tell who drops out, who got bad scores; they start preparing for you to either go to school or to jail. And I'm sure Mississippi's not that much different. Because again, it's all about let's restore our families, let's put back into our families those fireside values so if a young man needs money—go get a job. Don't hit Aunt Sue over the head and take her purse. Go get a job. I…I used to work at Krystal. I used to fry hamburgers years ago in Chicago, and I'll do that again today. So let's begin to think about the struggle of our ancestors, what they left for us. Let's build on that and make our homes, our communities, our families a better place. And we can do that. That's just not a cliché; we can do that.

LYONS: Well, thank you again for coming in. I really appreciate it.

WRIGHT: Thank you. Thank you.

END OF RECORDING

INDEX